

# Chapter 13

## Barriers to E-Government Implementation in Jordan: The Role of Wasta

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### ABSTRACT

*This paper identifies and highlights the significance of Wasta as a barrier to e-government implementation within The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and is part of a wider qualitative research study of all barriers. A longitudinal research approach was applied to explore any dynamism within the presence of barriers over a three year study, as well as to seek a richer understanding of such barriers. Data, principally collected via interviews with relevant stakeholders, was analysed using Strauss and Corbin's variant of grounded theory. Using illustrative quotations primarily from interview transcripts, this paper enunciates the significant and persistent role that Wasta plays in hindering Jordan's e-government implementation, both as an explicitly mentioned barrier and as cause of other barriers. The paper supports the view that culture is a root cause of e-government implementation difficulty, and that barriers vary with the different country settings in which e-government systems are embedded.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Wasta is a custom that is prevalent within Arab societies, including the Lebanon (Makhoul & Harrison, 2004), Saudi Arabia (Faisla & Abdella, 1993) and Egypt (Mohamad & Hamdy, 2008). It has

even been identified, albeit under the pseudonym of Guanxi, as a practice within China (Hutching & Weir, 2006). Cunningham and Sarayrah (1994) define Wasta as “either mediation or intercession. It denotes the person who mediates/intercedes as well as the act of mediation/intercession”(p.

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1). Wasta is a way of life for Jordanian citizens (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1994). It originates from tribal traditions, where one tribe would use a Wasta to intercede with another tribe to resolve any inter-tribal conflict and unrest. Nowadays, Wasta is most often associated with the act of one person interceding on behalf of another for financial/status gain. The Wasta has the same tribal origins to the person for whom s/he is interceding and is either a close friend or someone from within the extended family network. Performing the Wasta role is a way of gaining the respect of the network.

Although Wasta has similarity in meaning to several English terms, there is no wholly equivalent English concept. For instance, the activity of Wasta requires the presence of three roles; the role requiring Wasta to occur, the Wasta role per se, and the role that is the target of the Wasta (Kilani & Sakijha, 2002). In contrast, terms such as favouritism and nepotism (i.e., a special kind of favouritism shown to relatives when one is in a position of power, particularly with regard to job recruitment (Wong & Kleiner, 1994; Arasli et al., 2006) require only two of the three roles to be present within the act; namely, the receiver and the giver of the favouritism. Neither does Wasta equate to bribery, as the latter involves something to be given (often money) in exchange for 'the favour' received (Noonan, 1984) whereas the former relies on the strength of obligation of the Wasta to his/her network. Wasta could be classed as a form of corruption (Klitgaard, 1991), given that it is a behaviour that could be seen as corrupt, i.e., deviant from that which is ethically and/or morally correct (although, as Hooker (2009) explains, what might be considered ethically correct or incorrect may differ between cultures on the basis of their underlying traditions and values). However, corruption takes many forms than just Wasta, bribery being one other of these. Wasta appears to resemble aspects of the Freemason concept (which is more fully described in both Jones (1970) and Kameron (2008)), where gaining

membership is at least enhanced via the intercession of an existing member and that membership comes with obligations to other members to secure required ends (although it is formally stated that a Freemason should never use "his membership to promote his own or anyone else's business, professional or personal interests" (Mole, 2007)) However, unlike freemasons, Jordanian tribes do not have any written 'codes of conduct', and citizens have no choice as to which tribe they belong and whether or not they remain a member of the tribe.

In Jordan, Wasta is acknowledged publicly and formally supported (Kilani & Sakijha, 2002). Here, "senior members of the extended family intercede on behalf of younger or less privileged members in making arrangements for employment, overseas travel, business partnerships, university admissions, bank loans, marriages, and most other out-of-the-ordinary forms of negotiation" (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993, p. 1). Wasta is considered to have a major impact on decision making and any political change (Schlumberger, 2002; Cunningham & Sarayrah, 2004). Yet and rather surprisingly, Wasta has not figured as a significant barrier to e-government implementations in any of the existing literature based on countries in which such practices are prevalent, despite the fact that e-government implementation is employed as a instrument for political reform/change.

This paper describes the identification and justification of Wasta as a significant and persistent factor in impeding the e-government implementation within Jordan. Identification of this factor occurred as a result of analysing field-work data collected as part of a wider-ranging, qualitative research project exploring the nature and interrelationships between any factors that were found to influence Jordan's e-government implementation over time (as detailed in Kanaan, 2009). After a general review of the existing literature concerning barriers to e-government implementations, this paper provides an overview

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